

'Ice Man' Craig ready for another Winter Classic

By Dan Rosen - NHL.com Staff Writer

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-- Dan Craig

As NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman stood on a podium at Fenway Park on July 15 announcing to the world that the 2010 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic would be played in Boston, Dan Craig was fly fishing in Albany, Wyoming, where cell phones go silent and televisions remain dark.

"Great day," Craig told NHL.com.

It was a well-deserved respite for the NHL's Facilities Operations Manager. While Craig's day-to-day responsibility as an NHL employee is to make sure the ice in all 30 arenas is playable every night, planning and executing the Winter Classic has become a job unto itself for the League's foremost authority on ice making.

"I don't know if it's nine months (a year), but it's pretty close," Craig said.

Even over the summer, when the New Year's Day game was still more than two months away, Craig was diligently working on preliminary planning, touching on everything from where the now famous refrigeration truck will be parked (Van Ness Street) to where the water will come from to make the ice atop Fenway Park's field.

This job isn't as simple as laying down a floor, building ice over it, anchoring in the boards and glass and sliding some pucks out for a game of shinny. Building these rinks for the Winter Classic is complicated, and Fenway Park presents its own set of challenges.

"Every one is going to have its own little glitches and stuff you have to work through and it's nothing that has surprised me," Craig said. "You're prepared for those things and you have to figure out the best way to get through them. We have months to figure it out which helps us out a whole lot."

Rolling into Boston

Craig and his staff, which is still being assembled, will arrive at Fenway on Dec. 10, the earliest they have taken over a building for a Winter Classic in the three-year history of the event.

But just because they load in early doesn't mean they have the luxury of extra time.

"Zero advantage because they want to be skating on the 18th because of obligations the

Red Sox and the Bruins have," Craig said. "I thought we would be ready for noon on the 18th and the contract I just read tells me I have to be ready for 9 a.m. skating on the 18th, so realistically you have eight days."

Craig, though, is comforted now that the NHL owns the flooring and refrigeration systems necessary to build the rink. They are stored in a warehouse in Toronto and with one phone call Craig could have the truck and the four containers with the flooring system on the road the next morning and he could be making ice 72 hours later.

"I know I don't have to go shopping around to find everything," Craig said. "I know what is on the truck. I know what is available. That's why we built the system the way we did because we could pick this thing up and go anywhere at any time. You know everything has been cleaned, serviced, put back in and we're ready to go. That's the nice part."

Tackling the challenges

Before Craig needs refrigeration and flooring systems, he said they have to build a base floor roughly two to three inches above the field to create an air pocket between the rink and the dirt.

This is a request the Red Sox made because if the rink's base is flush on the field it will push frost into the dirt, which would set Fenway's grounds' crew back a week to 10 days as they prepare for the Sox home opener in the spring.

"We're very conscious of what not only is happening there in December, but also in March," Craig said.

A different floor means different connection points for the boards, so Craig is going through diagrams now to solve that issue. The other issue he'll face before the ice-making process begins is leveling the field.

After just eyeballing the infield during one of his two site surveys, Craig said he could tell that the first base side dips down slightly. Of course, any dip in the surface makes it difficult to have a level sheet of ice, so Craig said they'll have to build the floor accordingly to make the base level.

Once all that is complete Craig and his staff will begin the process of laying out the flooring system and building ice. That comes with challenges, too.

Their water source is underneath the stands, but it doesn't pump out 140-degree H₂O, which is necessary. They have a heat exchanger that gets the water to the proper temperature, but according to the fire marshal, Craig can't have that under the stands near the water source because of the large propane tank.

"Last year we brought water from outside the wall and this year we'll be bringing it in from the inside," Craig said. "We still have to keep the heat exchanger on the outside of

the building."

To heat the water they'll run a piping system from outside the stadium, through the concourse and back out the first base dugout. It'll run near concession stands and restrooms, but Craig said they'll build scaffolding to keep the mess to a minimum.

"We're going to try to dress it up the best we can, but it's there," Craig said.

Making the ice

Once the challenges are met, the task of making the ice is simple and straightforward. It's just as they do it in an indoor rink.

Craig, though, doesn't yet know what the ice needs to look like on Dec. 18.

If the plan is to have some skating parties then there is no need for markings, but if the plan is to have hockey games from Dec. 18-25 then obviously markings and glass are necessary.

"We're supposed to know by the beginning of next week what the events will be," he said. "We plan on putting everything in, shaving down and coming back after Christmas and doing our stuff."

Unlike in years past, Craig and his staff will get a holiday break of more than just a couple of nights.

He plans to be out of Boston by the 20th and back the 26th. Last year, he left Chicago on the 23rd and came back the 26th. Two years ago, he spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day working at Ralph Wilson Stadium in Buffalo and vowed to never do it again.

While he's gone, Craig is hoping the crew from the TD Bank Garden will be able to monitor the site in his absence. Since he is again working with Eye on the Ice, a company that installs a wireless environmental monitoring system that provides live updates on the ice conditions from any computer or handheld device, Craig can always be in touch with his ice.

"Whenever I want and wherever I am," he said gleefully.

Upon returning to Boston, Craig said the plan is to spend a day manicuring the ice and making sure it's still level after a week of public skating events. They'll paint it white again, put in the lines, markings and sponsorship logos and build another fresh sheet on top to seal it all in.

By Dec. 29, Craig expects to have ice ready for an NHL game.

"The ice there from the 18th to the 25th is the base and we'll put a fresh sheet on top of

it," Craig said. "When you see pictures it will look like it's a brand new sheet and it basically is because we want to make sure we know what our guys are skating on."

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